

**Board of Education
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey
Public Hearing and Regular Session
Monday, May 1, 2024, 7:00 p.m.**

Minutes

This Public Hearing and Regular Session of the Upper Saddle River Board of Education was held in the Bogert School Gymnasium of the Upper Saddle River Schools beginning at 8:00 p.m. Mrs. Gandara opened the meeting and stated that the meeting was being held in compliance with PL 1975, Chapter 232 and appropriate notice had been provided to the designated newspapers, the Borough Clerk and all interested parties requesting such notification.

Members present: Mrs. Gandara, Mrs. Gray, Mrs. Ginsberg, Mr. Mehegan, Mr. Quagliani, Dr. Verducci, Mrs. Wenberg

Members absent: None

Also present: Dr. Siegel, Mrs. Imbasciani

REGULAR SESSION

Dr. Verducci made a motion, seconded by Mr. Quagliani to convene into Public Hearing/Regular Session at 7:00 p.m.

OPENING STATEMENT:

Mrs. Gandara

Mrs. Gandara welcomed the public and read the following statement:

It is both a privilege and a responsibility to address you on behalf of the Board of Education on such important matters: the safety and well-being of our children. It has been very troubling to hear some of our parents are feeling concerned about the safety of their children. Our schools serve as the cornerstone of our society, shaping not just young minds, but also the future of our communities. And in these uncertain times, it is imperative that we come together to ensure that our schools remain safe for all children, regardless of social or political differences.

We live in a world full of differences — differences in beliefs, ideologies and backgrounds. These diversities are what make our society rich and vibrant. However, they can also, if left unchecked, become sources of division and conflict. It is our duty, to contribute to our children's education, to teach them not only the academic subjects, but also the invaluable lessons of tolerance, understanding, and empathy.

In recent weeks, we have witnessed a troubling rise in polarization and hostility, on a national and global scale. Our children are not immune to these influences. Children see and hear a lot more than we are probably aware of. They absorb these messages, shaping their views of the world and of each other. When parents take to social media or other means to express personal views about school and student activities, what may have been well intended can become counter-productive.

While there are no options that will satisfy the convictions, experiences, and beliefs of everyone in our community, we have the power to counteract these negative influences. We have the power to instill in our children the values of respect and civility. We have the power to teach them that differences are not something to be feared or ridiculed, but rather something to be celebrated and embraced.

In regard to school safety, protecting our children is a top priority. From a building security perspective, we are constantly looking at our policies, practices and measures to evaluate their effectiveness. Just this year, we hired a full-time police officer doubling our security personnel for our schools as one measure of increasing our school security.

Achieving our vision requires collective effort. It requires us, as parents, as educators, as community members, to lead by example — to model the behaviors and attitudes we wish to see in our children, to promote empathy and compassion in our interactions, and to create spaces where all voices are heard and valued.

Looking to the future, let’s reaffirm our commitment to fostering a culture of tolerance and understanding in our schools and in our community. Let us stand united in our belief that every child deserves to feel safe, respected, and valued for who they are. And let’s not forget that it is through our collective efforts that we can continue to foster a safe learning environment where our children can achieve and thrive.

PUBLIC HEARING ON THE 2024/25 BUDGET

Mrs. Imbasciani

Mrs. Imbasciani presented the 2024/25 budget to the public. Highlights included:

- Budget timeline
- Goals for developing a responsible budget
- Look at State Aid through the years to Upper Saddle River
- Revenues and Expenditures
- Special Education (in-house vs. out-of-district)
- Debt Services has expired. The district is 100% tax free
- 1.9% tax levy increase, 0.66% tax rate increase. This translates into a \$54 increase over last year for an average assessed home (\$775,459) in Upper Saddle River

DISCUSSION:

- Mrs. Gandara explained that managing the budget is no small feat. She then thanked Mrs. Imbasciani for her time and work spent on the budget.
- Dr. Verducci stated that keeping the tax levy down and completing capital projects without a referendum is extraordinary. Thank you Mrs. Imbasciani.

PUBLIC COMMENTS (Pertaining to Public Hearing): None

A motion was made by Dr. Verducci and seconded by Mr. Quagliani to approve the 2024/25 Budget and was approved by all in attendance.

A. Approve the following Resolution:

RESOLUTION TO APPROVE THE 2024-2025 SCHOOL YEAR BUDGET

WHEREAS, the Upper Saddle River Board of Education adopted a tentative budget on March 18, 2024, and submitted it to the Executive County Superintendent of Schools for approval, and

WHEREAS, the tentative budget was approved by the Executive County Superintendent of Schools on March 28, 2024, and

WHEREAS, the tentative budget was advertised in the legal section of The Record on April 2, 2024; and

WHEREAS, the final budget was presented to the public during a public hearing held in the Bogert Gym, 391 West Saddle River Road, Upper Saddle River, NJ on May 1, 2024.

	Total	General Fund	Special Revenue	Debt Service
2024 - 2025 Total Expenditures	\$30,249,971	\$29,999,983	\$249,988	\$0
Less: Anticipated Revenues	\$4,941,784	\$4,691,796	\$249,988	\$0
Taxes to be Raised	\$25,308,187	\$25,308,187	\$0	\$0

BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of Education includes in the final budget an appropriation of surplus in the amount of \$1,841,368.

BE IT RESOLVED that the Upper Saddle River Board of Education includes in the final budget the adjustment for increased costs of health benefits in the amount of \$210,392. The additional funds will be used to pay for the additional increases in health benefit premiums.

BE IT RESOLVED that the Upper Saddle River Board of Education includes in the tentative budget a maximum travel expenditure in the amount of \$32,400.00 for the 2024-2025 School Year. The maximum travel expenditure amount for the 2023-2024 School Year is \$35,600.00 of which \$9,448.16 has been spent and \$619.00 has been encumbered as of April 30, 2024.

WHEREAS, the Upper Saddle River Board of Education recognizes school staff and Board members will incur travel expenses related to and within the scope of their current responsibilities and for travel that promotes the delivery of instruction or furthers the efficient operation of the school district; and

WHEREAS, N.J.A.C. 6A:23A Subchapter 7. requires Board members to receive approval of these expenses by a majority of the full voting membership of the Board and staff members to receive prior approval of those expenses by the Superintendent of Schools and a majority of the full voting membership of the Board; and

WHEREAS, travel and related expenses not in compliance with N.J.A.C. 6A:23A Subchapter 7 but deemed by the Upper Saddle River Board of Education to be necessary and unavoidable as noted on the approved Board of Education Out-of-District Travel and Reimbursement Forms;

NOW BE IT RESOLVED, the Upper Saddle River Board of Education approves all travel not in compliance with N.J.A.C. 6A:23A Subchapter 7 as being necessary and unavoidable as noted on the approved Board of Education Out-of-District Travel and Reimbursement Forms; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Upper Saddle River Board of Education includes in the tentative budget travel and related expense reimbursements in accordance with N.J.A.C. 6A:23A Subchapter 7, to a maximum expenditure of \$32,400.00 for all staff and board members for the 2024-2025 School Year. The School Business Administrator/Board Secretary shall track and record these costs to ensure that the maximum amount is not exceeded.

BE IT RESOLVED, that included in the general fund appropriations, budget line 620 is a withdrawal from Capital Reserve - Other Capital Projects in the amount of \$482,000 for Other Capital Project costs of the Cavallini Middle School elevator enclosure repair (\$250,000) and the replacement of one HVAC unit (\$232,000). The total cost of these projects is \$482,000 which represents expenditures for construction elements or projects that are in addition to the facilities efficiency standards determined by the Commissioner as necessary to achieve the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

PRESENTATION:

Discovery Day

Mr. Kaplan

Mr. Kaplan presented information about the 32nd annual Discover Day at Bogert School. He discussed the history and evolution of the day, the rotation of themes, and shared highlights of the 2024 Discovery Day, "Cultural Connections."

PUBLIC COMMENT:

- Mrs. Wahdan thanked Dr. Siegel for all he has contributed and wished him well.
- Ms. Abbas said that this Discover Day was the best event so far. She shared her child's positive experience and commended Mr. Kaplan. She suggested the schools do more programs like this to help combat HIB incidents.
- Mrs. Simon read a statement about Discovery Day that included concerns over safety and security protocols with outside vendors/guests, misinformation used for propaganda and dress codes.
- Mr. Deutsch thanked Mrs. Caravela and Mr. Kaplan for a successful day. He spoke of his family's positive experience with the day.

- Ms. Saker expressed concern that her child isn't able to represent her Palestinian culture here to represent diversity.
- Ms. Wahdan acknowledged this is an emotional evening. She invited everyone to examine personal biases and figure out a new way to approach things. She said, "Enough is enough. Our kids all go to the same schools. Let's make the schools a safe place for all of our children."
- Mr. Frankel suggested the schools check social media accounts of guest presenters coming into the schools. He said we need to know who is coming into our schools.
- Mr. Simon said that adults need to be adults and find a way to be inclusive.
- Mrs. Yotka said that she has been in Bogert since 2005 and Discovery Day has always been great. She requested that Science Fairs be brought back and said this community isn't ready for more than that.
- Mr. Recaman expressed concern over the safety of guests coming into schools.
- Mrs. Katz believes the Board and staff has the best interest of the children in mind. She likes the diversity of this community. She said Discovery Day was a great idea in theory but, going forward, this event should be limited to food and fun. She said to keep politics and people's feelings out of the event. Teachers should focus more on Reading, Writing and Mathematics rather than culture.
- Miss Chaudhry thanked the Board for being so inclusive and bringing in different cultures and also for providing her with an amazing education.
- Mr. Gunadasa thanked the Board and Mr. Kaplan for an amazing Discovery Day program. He said, "We're all one family. There is no place for hate, especially in the schools." He offered his services for diversity education and asked that Muslim holidays be included in the school calendar.
- Mrs. Frankel said that we are getting dangerously close to separation between Church and State.
- Mr. Chaudhry said he went through the Upper Saddle River Schools and never had any issues. He said that it's not impossible for everyone to get along. Let the kids get their education.
- Mr. Adams asked what preparation was done in advance of this Discovery Day knowing the toxicity of what is going on in the world. He asked, "What have you learned? What will you do going forward?"
- Mr. Feldman recommended keeping religion out of school. He suggested that focus should be on the origins of the area and not on ethnic diversity.
- Mrs. Akhtar reminded everyone that teachers do the best they can to protect their students.
- Mrs. Nadeem was impressed that Palestinian culture was showcased at Discovery Day.
- Mr. Toor, of Saddle River, said that Discovery Day was a beautiful cultural event. All cultures should be represented. Let's not be hateful and be open minded.
- Mr. Miziani, of Franklin Lakes, suggested we focus on similarities, not differences.
- Mrs. Hernandez said she has always had to show ID to entire school. She expressed concern over allowing outside visitors to enter the buildings without photo ID.
- A resident said that if we want to promote intolerance, we have to let students share where they come from. Continue the cultural element of Discovery Day.
- Miss Faraz said that experiencing cultures in our world is a gift and we should continue with Discovery Day.
- A resident said it is incumbent on us to teach our children about diversity – Discovery Day.
- Mrs. Aufiero said the Upper Saddle River staff loves the students and want the best for them. They are the best.
- A Paramus resident expressed concern over what is going on in the world.
- Mrs. Dario stated she is a proud American and loves this town and diversity and loves the staff and schools. She said we should come together as Americans and bring back patriotism and Flag Day.
- Mr. Sadaqah explained that a lot of false rumors were circulated about Discovery Day and suggested that people fact check with school administrators or the USRPD.
- Mrs. Reissman said we are here because we care about the kids and community. We didn't create the issues, we are just holding the burden. We should find ways to move forward. Everyone came because they cared and welcome the opportunity to move forward. It's not about religion – we have great kids and a great community. Celebrate that!
- Mrs. Gandara said the Board appreciates everyone coming out and sharing their thoughts and concerns. There is a lot of misinformation circulating throughout the community. On behalf of the Board of Education, she thanked everyone for taking the time to come out. There is nothing more important than the kids in Upper Saddle River. The Board will spend time addressing the comments and correcting the misinformation being put out there.

- Ms. Febres, Board Attorney, explained what the Board, students and staff can and cannot do with regards to speech and the dress code. The Board is trying to get feedback from the community to consider whether or not policies need to be modified.
- Dr. Siegel stated that this is the appropriate space for these types of discussions. The school staff is well aware of tensions and will make sure they are addressed appropriately. He also addressed security concerns and how Discovery Day presenters are vetted.
- Mr. Kaplan clarified how those who didn't have photo ID's on Discovery Day were checked. He highlighted the relationship the school district has with the Police Department. Mr. Kaplan addressed the false rumors that have been circulated about Discovery Day and explained the many security protocols the district adheres to. He spoke about what the school did in advance to prepare for Discovery Day. There were no violations of guidelines by any parent/presenter on Discovery Day. He recognized that the program guidelines will have to evolve with the times.
- Dr. Siegel thanked Mr. Kaplan for his informative presentation. He urged anyone with a concern to avoid social media posts and to refrain from the use of online and social media and to reach out to the school, Superintendent or Board member. If concerned about security, please contact the Upper Saddle River Police Department.
- Mrs. Gandara said the Board members are here because they care and want the best for the children and the community. Concerns about the dress code, security and updating policy guidelines have been noted and the Board will evaluate policies to see if they should be amended.

PERSONNEL:

Dr. Siegel

A motion was made by Dr. Verducci and seconded by Mrs. Wenberg to approve Personnel Consent Agenda Items A through G and was approved by all in attendance.

A. Create/Abolish

1. Abolish one .50 FTE Basic Skills Instructor position at Bogert School, effective September 1, 2024.
2. Create one 1.0 FTE Basic Skills Instructor position at Bogert School, effective September 1, 2024.
3. Create one 1.0 FTE Middle School ABA Special Education Teacher, effective September 1, 2024
4. Create one 1.0 FTE Middle School ABA Paraprofessional, effective September 1, 2024.
5. Abolish one 1.0 FTE Grades K-4 Instructional Support Teacher, effective July 1, 2024.
6. Abolish one 1.0 Grades 4-8 Instructional Support Teacher, effective July 1, 2024.

B. Job Description (not applicable)

C. Resignations

1. Accept the resignation of Cara Dellagatta, ABA PSH Paraprofessional, effective April 19, 2024.
2. Accept the resignation of Emma Piazza, 5th Grade Classroom Teacher, effective July 1, 2024.

D. Leaves (not applicable)

E. Appointments

1. Approve the following Resolution:

BE IT RESOLVED that the Upper Saddle River Board of Education (hereinafter referred to as the "Board") appoints C. Lauren Schoen, Ed.D. (hereinafter referred to as "Dr. Schoen") as the Interim Superintendent of Schools for the Upper Saddle River School District for the period beginning on July 1, 2024 and ending on June 30, 2025.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this Employment Agreement has been submitted to and approved by the Interim Executive County Superintendent, according to standards adopted by the Commissioner of Education, pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18a:7-8(j).

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board approves the Employment Agreement with Dr. Schoen for the position of Interim Superintendent of Schools for the foregoing period of appointment, which Employment Agreement is attached to this Resolution and made a part hereof.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board hereby authorizes the Board President and the Business Administrator/Board Secretary to execute, on behalf of the Board, the Employment Agreement by and between the Board and Dr. Schoen.

2. Appoint Alison Vanasse to the position of Middle School ABA Special Education Classroom Teacher at Cavallini Middle School, BA, Step 11-12, effective September 1, 2024, subject to the criminal history records check required by law.

F. Change in Assignment

1. Approve the transfer of Katharine Miros from a .50 Special Education and Basic Skills Instructor to the position of 1.0 FTE Basic Skills Instructor at Bogert School, effective September 1, 2024.
2. Approve the transfer of Jill Powers from a 1.0 FTE Grade 1 Elementary Classroom Teacher to the position of 1.0 FTE Special Education Teacher at Bogert School, effective September 1, 2024.

G. Substitutes/Consultants/Volunteers

1. Approve Natalie DeSanctis as a substitute teacher/paraprofessional for the 2023/24 school year. Ms. DeSanctis' NJ Substitute Teaching certificate is pending.
2. Approve Carlee Hults as a substitute teacher/paraprofessional for the 2023/24 school year, subject to the criminal history records check required by law. Ms. Hults holds NJ Substitute Teaching certificate.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- Mrs. McGovern spoke about the positive experiences her child had with Mr. Van Hoven and asked the Board of Education to reconsider his resignation.
- Dr. Siegel stated that he cannot speak of evaluations of staff in public, they are confidential.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion to adjourn was made by Dr. Verducci and seconded by Mrs. Ginsberg 9:35 p.m.

Dana Imbasciani, Board Secretary